



## Pick Your Path to Health

### **Asian American Women and Tobacco**

What if someone told you that there's one thing Asian American women can do to improve their health and live longer, would you do it?

Well, there is something you can do. Quit smoking. And if you don't smoke, never, ever start and stay away from secondhand smoke. Quitting can be hard, but it may be the most important thing you do to improve your health.

#### **Smoking and Your Health**

Cigarette smoking accounts for 87 percent of all lung cancers, doubles your risk for heart disease and significantly elevates your risk for stroke. Lung cancer was the leading cause of cancer death among Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, in 1993, causing 22 percent of the deaths. But that's not all. Smoking damages your reproductive health and is associated with reduced fertility and early menopause. Women who smoke during pregnancy subject themselves and their babies to special risks, including pregnancy complications, premature birth, low-birth-weight infants, stillbirth, and infant mortality.

#### **Good News**

The good news is smoking rates among Asian American women are lower than other groups. Only 12.4 percent of all Asian American women smoke, and Chinese and Filipino American women smoke even less than other Asian women. Another plus is that many Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders are trying to quit smoking. They are more likely to have quit for at least one day during the last year than white Americans. And those who are aged 55 and older are quitting more often than younger people.

"If you look at the research and compare smoking rates among immigrant Asian woman and Asians born in the United States, you'll notice that the highest rates are among the American-born Asian women," said Barbara Yee, PhD, Associate Professor at the University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston. "This difference is related to acculturation."

#### **Facing the Challenge**

But smoking isn't the only problem. Secondhand smoke is a major health concern for Asian American women and their families. Each year, 3,000

nonsmoking adults die from lung cancer and 35,000 die from heart disease as a result of breathing secondhand smoke. Another 7,500 to 15,000 children are hospitalized for lower respiratory tract infections such as pneumonia and bronchitis as a result of exposure to secondhand smoke. And 200,000 to 1 million asthmatic children suffer increased numbers of asthma attacks and more severe asthma conditions as a result of exposure to tobacco smoke in the environment. With Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders being 4.1 percent of the population, you can be sure that many are affected.

"Women need to protect themselves and their children from secondhand smoke," said Yee. "Smoking is very prevalent among several groups of Asian American men and exposure to this secondhand smoke can have detrimental affects on the health of Asian American women and their children."

### **Where Do I Start?**

If you smoke, there are small steps you can take to help yourself quit smoking:

- Before you quit, think about the things that make you want to smoke and try to substitute other things in place of smoking, such as walking, reading, meditation, or having sugar free gum.
- Set a quit date. Throw away all of your cigarettes and do not keep any in the home. Smoking even a few cigarettes a day can hurt your health. If you try to smoke fewer cigarettes, but do not stop completely, soon you'll be smoking the same amount again.
- You don't have to rely on your willpower alone. Talk to your doctor about effective tobacco dependence treatments. Also, tell your family and friends that you're quitting and join a local support group; it can increase your chance of success.
- Do not believe what the advertisements tell you. Tobacco marketers often target Asian American communities and stores. They have led many women to believe that smoking is socially desirable and makes women independent. This is not true; it is only a way to get you to buy cigarettes.
- Don't give up. If you temporarily go back to smoking, pick another quit date, get support from your family, friends, and health care provider and try to quit again. Many women need to try to quit several times before they finally succeed.

Taking small steps to control those things in life that can make you healthier and free of disease is worth a try. Smoking you can control; disease you cannot. Good health is the best reason to keep on trying to quit.

### **Resources:**

The National Women's Health Information Center offers a list of resources in your community. Call 1-800-994-WOMAN or TDD 1-888-220-5446 or visit "A Breath of Fresh Air" at <http://www.4woman.gov>.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention offer free "Quit Tips" and information on smoking cessation. Call 1-800-CDC-1311.

For a copy of *You Can Quit Smoking*, a consumer guide call 1-800-358-9295.

The American Cancer Society sponsors the "Great American Smokeout" in November. Call 1-800-ACS-2345.

The American Lung Association 1-800-LUNG-USA.

*Pick Your Path to Health is a national public health education campaign sponsored by the Office on Women's Health within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. For more information about the campaign, please call 1-800-994-WOMAN or 1-888-220-5446 (TDD), or visit the National Women's Health Information Center at <http://www.4woman.gov/> To request weekly health tips by e-mail, click on the box that says, "Click Here for weekly health tips by e-mail."*